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Basic questions from a layman's viewpoint about the teaching of reading and other related issues are discussed. The questionable effects of the mass media on parental attitudes toward and awareness of reading issues is pointed out, and the need for professional communication on these issues is emphasized. Topics such as methods of teaching reading, dyslexia, and speed reading are briefly discussed. Emphasis is placed on parent-teacher communication and cooperation, on the provision of good books, and on the best possible methods for teaching children to read those books. (RT)

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QUESTIONS PARENTS ASK

It's a pleasure to be here at the prestigious International Reading Association, filling the role I've filled as a public servant identified with the PTA for the last 17 years--that of layman at a conference of professionals. I've represented the public at so many conferences on education, health, social welfare--you name it, I've been there--that I've come to look on myself as a full-time professional layman. In your field, the teaching of reading, I take some pride in being a passionate layman.

Passionate disciples are always fired to talk about their causes to anyone, but I find it especially gratifying to have an opportunity to confer with you experts about my passion, and to bring all these other professional laymen from the PTA to enlarge the dialogue between the parents, whom we represent, and the teachers of reading, in the hope that conversations like this will take place in every school in the country, to the everlasting benefit of the young people in whom all of us are interested. I'll ask questions that I've heard parents ask, and I hope you will answer them in your schools and give the parents there opportunities to ask their own.

Although I speak for parents in this colloquy, I cannot pretend that I am today's average parent. For one thing, I'm not nearly young enough to be average.

In many other ways, too, I am unlike other parents and other professional laymen because my life has been marked by a series of reading serendipities which, added together, constitute a course in how to teach reading. So I am speaking now as this kind of expert--what behavioral scientists call experiential and I call life-trained. This is the kind of preparation that is worthless when you're seeking certification, I find.

My own experience, of course, is rooted in reading because my generation was a reading generation. No one set up programs for recreation for me as a little girl in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but in my neighborhood, just two miles away, there was a library, with a big children's room, where every Friday afternoon we had a story hour. Almost every afternoon, I walked those two miles to the public library. This recreation was the goal of the day. I always borrowed two books, which were all you were allowed to borrow, and I usually got them from the fiction section in the library between "A" and "C" which was right by the door because I seldom ventured into the depths of the children's room. I took them home but I'm afraid I very seldom read them. I took home, perhaps a hundred times during two or three years, "Aldrich, The Story of a Bad Boy" and, you know what: I have not read it yet! But this was an orientation, and a pleasant identification with books. I walked all over Pittsburgh to get copies of Tom Swift and The Bobbsey Twins which they did not have at the library, and I read them. But at least my orientation was to books as recreation and to the library as the center of this recreation. No questions for you arise from this experience of course.

Then I have the kind of experience that comes to an over-conscientious parent. When my first baby came along, the most wonderful thing happened to me--an encyclopaedia salesman sold me a set of Childcraft! I didn't know anything about reading to children since I was the youngest in the family,and we didn't have any relatives who had any babies. It was literally true that practically the first baby I ever saw close up was my own, and I was panic-stricken. So I began a small collection of books on the care and feeding of babies.

When the encyclopaedia salesman came with his promises about what Childcraft Encyclopaedia would do for me as a mother making her way uncertainly through a maze of decisions and activities, each of which I knew would have a profound and ineradicable influence on my child when he grew up, I pledged $3.00 a month out of my meager household budget, bought the Childcraft, and addressed myself to reading every single word of it.

My son was already nine months old when I got it and I was stunned to learn that, beginning at the age of six months, you should read nursery rhymes aloud to your child regularly. I feared for the irrevocable damage that must already have been done during the three months that had gone by and I had not done my duty as a mother.

I felt silly reading those nursery rhymes to him, but the magic worked, and he loved the rhymes. You know how children will react to the rhythm of the words, even if they are not reacting to your own joy in communicating with them. I found that this exchange of joy between Peter and me by way of the nursery rhymes was one of the most pleasant experiences for us both. Then it said that you should read good stories to your child every night. Dutifully I read to that little boy every night, and if I did not read, my husband did. When we went out, his baby-sitter read. It was hard down in Georgia, where we were living then, because some of his baby-sitters could not read, which was a real handicap for them as well as us.

In Childcraft I learned that a parent must never teach a child to read a single word, that his function is to provide the readiness experiences described above. He should take the child places, and then talk to him about the things he saw so that he could become skillful in the use of language. I cheated, because my child would often ask me, "What is that word?" I don't know how he knew that there were words there, but somehow he got the idea. I would tell him, and then I'd feel guilty for days because I was sure that when he got to school he probably had learned the wrong way to identify this word. The fact that he could identify words on signboards puzzled me terribly because he was not supposed to be able to, and I did not teach him.

This theory, I learned later, was based on a belief in the universal timing of development in children. The theory held that they all reached the ability to learn to read at the same time, and that time was age six. If you tried to force them before then their eye muscles were not developed, coordination was not good, which probably put a strain on them; in general, they were just not ready for it. You mustn't teach them, and it was just an accident if they learn a few words, as my children did. Like most untutored parents, I found it interesting, and comforting that everybody ripened to reading ability at the same year, and I was impressed with your mysterious expertise which had defined for all you high priests of reading instruction just when everyone was ready to read.

Another thing that this implied was that the same process of teaching is effective for all children. I didn't really analyze all this when I was living through it, but I have been analyzing it since, with your help. Obviously this is not true; but you know that a young, stupid, well-meaning mother like me will swallow anything, and I swallowed all of this.

Everybody was ready at the same time; the same process was right for every child. It also implied what I still have, and that is, a respect for the teaching ability of teachers. I no longer have the implicit disrespect for the teaching ability of all parents, however, We have recently been hearing that good or bad, all parents are teachers from the first day; most of us recognize that now, and some parents have proved to be very able teachers of reading.

When my two children went to school I learned that there was a way of teaching reading--the only way as far as I was concerned--which was a word identification method. Both children learned to read immediately when they went to school, therefore, as far as I ~~was concerned~~ knew, this was the method, and I never questioned the divine wisdom of whoever had handed down the dictum that all children should be taught by the same method.

I ought to mention that all this reading and readiness activity in our family took place in a television-free environment even though the television age had dawned. We lived in a mountain canyon in Santa Fe; the transmission was bad from Albuquerque, so we didn't have a set, and we remained book-oriented.

By a process of happy accident I became chairman of reading and library service for the state PTA. Then I just woke up one morning and found myself president of the New Mexico PTA. I never worked my way up through the "chairs", but I traveled the unlikely route through the reading and library service chairmanship, so that I had every opportunity to relate books and reading to the schools and to devise programs for parents which would explore these important functions in a community. It was a special privilege, I think, that I had this opportunity to work with parents, books, and reading. In 1955 I became chairman of the National PTA's Committee on Reading and Library Service. I began nose to nose with the reading controversy that was stirred up by Rudolf Flesch about then with his publication of Why Johnny Can't Read. It became my primary challenge to see to it that all Johnnys could read, and I am afraid I started with a defensive prejudiced attitude, which was "Why, Johnny can so read; I know from my own experience."

As far as most parents were concerned, Dr. Flesch was the first person to draw their attention to the fact that a difference of opinion existed among teachers about how reading is taught. ~~That~~ His theory that the phonics were the only method for all teaching of reading was so emphatic, sanctification of phonics ensued.

I think the mass media were the real propagators of the faith of laymen in phonics. They are still, because there is still the blindest faith among us parents in the magic of phonics as a method of teaching our children to read. Those of you who were noticing this epidemic of phonics fever of the mid-50's will remember all of the teach-it-yourself courses in phonics for parents that were published in the popular press, along with dozens of articles by Dr. Flesch and his followers. I often wonder how much money he made out of the great explosion of his thesis that phonics is the only method of teaching reading.

The popular reaction to his book was unbelievable and immediately following publication the teaching of reading became the unlikely topic of social conversation.

Very shortly most of the PTA meetings I went to had programs that were devoted to "How is reading taught in our school?" I discovered that in spite of Dr. Flesch, who said that phonics were not taught anywhere, that phonics were being taught, along with word identification methods, in our schools at least, and some children seemed to be learning to read. I don't know why I should have been so surprised that so professional a matter was so popular, knowing the nature of parents first hand as I do.

This constituted my popular course in reading methods and, as I said earlier, I am not just the average parent. I want to tell you, though, that the other people who have not had my advantages, such as associating with people like you and occasionally learning something straight from you, are parents who are deeply interested in their children's education.

I think the outbreak at the Ocean Hill-Brownsville School District is the most dramatic, awful illustration of the kind of faith we parents put in the schools. Whatever form it takes, we parents have the greatest faith in you people who teach our children in schools, and we are continuously and anxiously measuring your competency by observing the progress of our children. We just don't have a very good measure to apply besides the grades you give them, which we don't always understand. The one that we think we understand is ~~the~~ measure of their ability to read. If we know they can read, we think we can tell whether they are succeeding or not. Unfortunately, our own measure is based on memories of how we learned to read ourselves, which in most cases was so long ago and we were so untutored that we really couldn't recognize a teaching method as such, but that doesn't make any difference. We know that, whatever it was, the way we were taught was the best way, and you had better be prepared to defend any deviation from it.

If our children don't measure up--and I think it is almost impossible for a child to measure up to the expectations his parents hold for him, especially in the area of reading--we immediately look for a scapegoat. The first scapegoat is you, the teacher. If we happen to like the teacher, and we have met her through a PTA meeting or in some other unpressured situation, then we are willing to put the blame for our failure on those great gods in the central office who decree the teaching method in a school system. It must be the way you are forced to teach. If we can agree that enough phonics are being taught, then we put our blame on the schools and we make a general indictment that the schools are no good.

I am sure most of you who are parents must know that parents seldom blame themselves for the fact that their children don't learn to read, or that they don't succeed in school. Yet we all know, who even had a glimpse of your professional reasoning, that parents are directly responsible for whether or not children learn, especially to read. This leads to the difficult challenge you have in communicating to parents their responsibility in this vital process.

While you are wondering how to educate us, the mass media, those "pop" adult educators of our time, keep us informed about new developments in this field where we feel so competent to measure. It's usually of the "adding fuel to the flame" variety.

For instance, this past winter we've had what seemed a repeat of the Flesch phenomenon as the press and partisans of the phonics method brayed the results of what sounds like a solid study by Dr. Jeanne Chall of Harvard. Most of the reviews I've read, as I understand them, do not claim that Dr. Chall has made an overwhelming case for her conclusion so I'm not quoting her, but on all sides my friends who are media fans are crowing that she "proved conclusively" that "phonics" is the only way to teach reading successfully.

In recent years the media have added to the "pop" curriculum for us parents ITA and IPI and speed reading. For the benefit of the PTA people here, I'll translate: ITA, I think, means Initial Teaching Alphabet method, a phonetic method which presents symbols for 44 sounds, and IPI is Individually Prescribed Instruction, in which curriculum is tailored to the specific needs of each individual child. Given my choice of fads, I'd choose it for my children, even above phonics. Everyone has learned of the miraculous advantages of speed reading courses from the streamer headlines on the full-page advertisements for the courses.

Jeanne Chall only studied the fever of the past two or three years which infects us. That is that the parent is not only the first teacher of reading but he has an obligation to give academic teaching to his children from the very day of their birth. This, although I think it is perfectly sound in theory, has led to what you might call excesses. A great many articles have been written in those great educational media, the women's magazines, touting the phenomenal successes of some parents in teaching 18-month-old children to read and making all the other millions of parents, who have not achieved this success, feel extremely guilty at their failure to achieve what apparently you might expect of any average child given these opportunities. Whether this early teaching has any adverse effects or any advantages in the long run we never consider.

We have a new scapegoat for our failures, and I hold you responsible for it--and that is dyslexia. This poorly defined concept is fast supplementing phonics as a sure-fire topic of social conversation. Parents who are not satisfied with their children's progress are applying this pious diagnosis themselves. One of the roots of their confusion is that you experts won't say three percent of children suffer dysteria, or that 60 percent of them do, but you do give us your enormous leeway when your estimates range from three to 60 percent. And we are sure our child who is not doing just as well as he can be expected to do--considering his heredity and early experiences--must be a victim of this great scapegoat, this mysterious blameless reason why he does not read--dyslexia. It has real social status; even press agents know about it. I recently read a story about a lovely young actress who is beginning a great dramatic career having overcome the nearly insuperable obstacle of being dyslectic as a child. There's a refreshing image for the new Hollywood!

With this too-long development of my status as a not-so-average parent, and my chronology of professional developments in your field of which all kinds of parents have been "informed", I do have some questions to ask of you on behalf of the parents I represent.

Perhaps the first question 1969 parents ask is: In view of the pervasive influence of television everywhere and the widespread use of audio-visual material, is reading really necessary anymore? I am making the assumption, as I presume all of you make, that the answer is yes, reading and the use of

language is still the foundation of the education process. Our faith in this firm fact has been shaken in recent years, as perhaps yours has been, by the various pronouncements of Marshall McLuhan, Margaret Meade, and their disciples. No matter what they say, everything leads me to the conclusion that reading now and for some time to come is going to be the foundation of the learning process. I believe this implicitly in spite of the fact that the education meetings I have attended for the last four or five years have seemed to reflect the machine age in the classroom as well as everywhere else in our society. In fact there has been so much emphasis on programmed learning and TV teaching and other mechanical means of presenting materials to young people, that I did hear someone say at the White House Conference on Children and Youth in 1960 that they predict that in the year 2000 the Ford Foundation will undertake a study to determine the feasibility of having a real live teacher in every classroom!

Most parents might not take my word for it since I am hardly an authority on this subject in anyone's eyes. So they might well ask what authority says that reading is important. I can answer that, too, by quoting an authority among you, Dr. Francis Chase, who was Dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Chicago, whom I heard talking about the challenge to education in the 60's. I don't know what I had expected him to talk about, but I was absolutely dazzled when he began to develop the thesis that it is the primary challenge of education in the 60's to see to it that every child between the ages of two and six is read to from a book by "someone he loves" (as Dr. Chase put it) as the absolute prerequisite to learning in school.

He went on to define what he meant by "someone he loves". This is any of the adults with whom the child identifies positively--his parents, his older brothers and sisters, his grandparents, particularly or anyone whom he wishes to emulate. The adult model sets the child's attitude towards books and reading; whether he does it positively or negatively, he does it inevitably. If a parent, or the adult whom the child admires and loves, reads books for his own pleasure and information, he communicates to the child the belief that in books there is something for him, too. Especially if he reads to the child from a book and shares some delightful experience with him, then the child himself is motivated when he goes to school and the ultimatum is handed down "Now you will learn to read," because he knows that within the covers of the book there is something delicious for him.

Dr. Chase departed from this thesis to say that some educators have to provide these opportunties for children because obviously a vast majority of children do not have any adult whom they love to read to them from a book before they go to school. He suggested that perhaps we should organize senior citizens, who are usually appealing to children and are usually eager to be of use in the community, to go into all kinds of neighborhoods and read books to children.

He kept emphasizing "from a book," which is an answer to another question asked by many parents: "Don't children have these acculturating experiences through their viewing of TV?" In explanation of his answer, he pointed out that the dynamic interaction between adults and children in the flesh in motivating a child to learn to read is not there when you are getting these stimuli from a machine. For another thing, television experiences are not book-related so they do not serve the same purpose.

You will recognize that Dr. Chase was years before Head Start, so I was not a bit surprised when all of the preliminary rationale of Head Start began to hit the press.

Parents who are concerned that they prepare children for school, as PTA parents are, ask floods of questions, among them:

If these vital early childhood experiences are so good for poor children how can we provide them for all children in all neighborhoods?

How much should we teach our children before they go to school? Where can we learn how to teach them?

If I can't teach my child to learn how to read before he goes to school, will he ever catch up with the children who did learn early?

What is a "good" book for my child? Where can I get a list of them? Where can I buy or borrow some?

Then we ask: Which reading method is best? Which one is being used to teach my child? Unfortunately, not so many PTA programs these days are devoted to the teaching of reading in our school. I don't know whether it's your fault or ours, but I beg of you to take the initiative and suggest to your PTA that there be at least one program every year on the subject of the teaching of reading in your school.

Who takes the first step in arranging programs--parent or teacher?

In fact, one of the questions most frequently asked in individual PTA's is:

Why doesn't our school have a library? We can't reproduce the old reliance on the public library; but we must focus now on providing good books to read in school.

It seems that providing "good" books for children in an easily accessible place has become part of the modern social dilemma. But I found one of the answers in a clipping from a recent Chicago Tribune. In a ghetto school they have a program that is called "Read, Baby, Read." And what is it? It hasn't, as you might suspect, anything to do with learning to read in your reader, but it's providing a wide range of books in paperback form on various subjects and various kinds of literature for children. They have a club, set goals appropriate to reading levels of the students, and give them points for the number of books that are read. They found that the children were so fascinated with the reading that was made available to them that almost every grade had more than double the ultimate number of points before the program was half over.

Are such programs desirable or necessary? Yes! But still too few schools provide them.

Recently we have been asking: How can I tell if my child is learning? If not, why not? What is dyslexia? Is someone testing to see if my child has it?

My child is a slow learner-will it improve my child's reading if he takes a speed reading course? The sensational newspaper writing that promises miracles has put another burden on parents who want their children to read well. We very much need a sound evaluation of these courses with recommendations for the anxious parent that only you can give.

What should I be doing at home to help my child learn to read? Is he getting enough phonics?

These are some of the questions parents ask, and they'd ask you if such opportunities were only provided. For they want to have faith in you as the source of all knowledge about reading--the kind of faith I have.

These are the articles of my faith in you.

First, reading CAN be taught. I know it can because you have proved it. You have been teaching children for generations how to read, and you should take special pride in the fact that you have taught millions and millions more in the last one or two generations than were ever taught to read before. Sometimes you don't stop to think about your success because people are so busy pointing out your failures.

I must conclude--although perhaps you don't share this point of view--that it is not clearly agreed among you which method of teaching reading is the most effective. I also conclude that it is clearly understood now by everyone, except all parents, that parents are partners in this important project. I know you will agree with me that you cannot successfully teach without the parents as partners. So I urge you to help the PTA to carry out its self-appointed mission of interpreting reading methods. We do it through programs and as I said almost every local PTA in the country had a program on how reading is taught in our schools after Flesch's book was published. We have institutes at our own conventions; our PTA Magazine has had articles which interpret all of these developments in the teaching of reading over the years. ~~We do have a study course attached to each of these articles on the teaching of reading.~~ We provide opportunities for parent education because the PTA is an adult education organization, and we try to provide opportunities for parents to know what their responsibilities in their children's learning are. All of these things are provided through the PTA. But we are not effective at all unless you, right in your school system, are active in the education process of your partners, the parents of the children whom you teach.

We PTA'ers are here today to urge you not to let parents flounder around, well-meaning, trying to find out what is going on in our children's reading, but to make the first advances yourself. Court us a little bit, disseminate to us some of your professional knowledge, interpret to us what you are doing and what you expect of us as parents. Follow the example set here by Dr. Carl Smith and IRA. I said that reading can be taught, because it is being taught, and I end by saying it must be taught if we are going to provide a firm foundation for the education of the children of this country.

I also warn you of the obvious: If you don't answer the questions parents ask, if you don't make the contribution of the parents to this process positive, it will be negative. What a word to end a talk on. Let me add something positive. Cheers! Excelsior! Onwards and upwards! Let us meet our challenge on the firmest foundation we can provide--working together.